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No suburb is an island, especially in hard economic times, elected leaders of almost two dozen north and northwest suburbs have come to realize.

"We all can't have everything. The more we can work together and promote things, the better," Elliott Hartstein, village president of Buffalo Grove, said Tuesday during a gathering of the municipalities' leaders at the Northbrook office of U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th.

Hartstein had floated the idea with lesser success five years ago. But faced with tumbling revenues and struggling businesses, more suburban officials now believe their communities have a better chance of getting access to federal stimulus funding or government appropriations for regional projects.

While holding their hands out, they also symbolically joined hands during the Tuesday discussion.

"What's good in Waukegan or Gurnee or Buffalo Grove is also good for Lincolnshire," Mayor Brett Blomberg said. "If we can step in and put some of that money into Waukegan to clean up their harbor, we could clean up the environment, get their downtown started, which would be an economic engine for all of us in the area. That just seems like win-win all the way around."

A regional approach makes sense, they said, when it comes to flood control, road improvements and replacing aging infrastructure.

"Flooding doesn't stop at the border of one town, it keeps going," noted Sandy Frum, village president-elect of Northbrook.

That said, some communities in the 10th Congressional District are hurting more than others.

An ambitious project to renovate Long Grove's downtown was begun a few years ago and "then the bottom fell out of the economy," Mayor Maria Rodriguez said. "We are hoping for some stimulus money to go ahead because our merchants are struggling, no doubt about it."

Without a business district, even tony Kenilworth will be hard pressed to rely solely on local property taxes, Village President-elect Fred Steingraber reported.

"In this kind of environment, with the CPI negative last year and negative probably for at least the first half of this year, we're going to be in tough shape for the next couple of years with regard to our revenue sources, which are flat to down," he said.

Many of the elected officials believe banks and lenders are key to getting the stagnant housing market moving again.

Fred Gougler, village president-elect of Northfield, said 74 properties are on the market in his community, and just one is under contract.

"I think housing is at core of what most of our villages are facing in terms of getting that economic stimulus to really work," he said.

Yet, even with federal stimulus funds, banks don't seem to be responding. Blomberg said just one of eight banks responded recently when Lincolnshire applied for a \$1.54 million loan.

"That seems outrageous to me," he said. "We're supposed to be helping banks and getting money circulated, but only one out of eight was able to do something for us."

Other elected officials lamented that the federal stimulus package seems to have little to nothing for small businesses.

"I think the way to really stimulate the economy is to get the money in the hands of the people who are really the economy, which is the small business owner, the people who are going to hire people. None of these packages get the money into their hands. How do we reduce their taxes? How do we reduce even their liabilities to get them the money and expect them to hire people?" Michael Rummel, the retiring mayor of Lake Forest, asked.

Michael Belsky, mayor of Highland Park, asked Kirk to study ways that municipalities could pool resources for employee pensions and health care liability, thereby making those obligations more efficient and affordable.

Kirk urged the mayors and village presidents to seek as much money as they can through grants and other funding opportunities in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

"We need quick action by our communities to take advantage of federal funds for economic development," he said. "Given federal deficits, the stimulus funds available now represent good but brief opportunities for suburbs to improve infrastructure and spur economic growth."